

Autoimmune Disease: How to Stop Your Body from Attacking Itself

By [Mark Hyman, MD](#) on 09/14/2009

The incidence of [autoimmune disease](#) has tripled in the last few decades. 24 million Americans are now affected. In fact, it affects more women than [heart disease](#) and [breast cancer](#) combined.

But autoimmune disease isn't just one condition ...

You're probably familiar with the most common autoimmune diseases, like [rheumatoid arthritis](#), lupus, multiple sclerosis, inflammatory bowel disease, type-1 diabetes, [hypothyroidism](#), and psoriasis. But there are many more autoimmune diseases that affect the nervous system, joints and muscles, skin, endocrine gland, and heart.

Simply put, autoimmune diseases are conditions where the body's immune system attacks its own tissues rather than a foreign molecule like bacteria. This happens when something confuses the immune system. Increasingly, that "something" appears to be the enormous load of [environmental toxins](#) to which we are all exposed.

Environmental Toxins: The Leading Cause of Autoimmune Disease

We are exposed to astounding amounts of pollution. Over 80,000 chemicals have been introduced into our society since 1900, and only 550 have been tested for safety. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), about 2.5 billion pounds of [toxic chemicals](#) are released yearly by large industrial facilities. And 6 million pounds of [mercury](#) are poured into our air every year.

In fact, a recent government survey – "[The National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals](#)" issued in July 2005 -- found an average of 148 chemicals in our bodies. And those were only the ones for which they tested. (i)

It gets worse ...

The [Environmental Working Group](#) examined the umbilical cord blood of children just as they emerged from the womb. They found 287 industrial chemicals, including pesticides, phthalates, dioxins, flame-retardants, Teflon, and toxic metals like [mercury](#). And this was before these infants even entered the world!

That's not to mention the [toxins](#) found in our foods and other chemicals typically found in the home, like certain cleaning agents or pest control products – all of which add to the total toxic load on our bodies.

One wonders what all of this poison is doing to our children ...

In his foreword to *The Autoimmune Epidemic*, Dr. Douglas Kerr, M.D., Ph.D., a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, says that “there is no doubt that autoimmune diseases are on the rise and our increasing environmental exposure to toxins and chemicals is fueling the risk. The research is sound. The conclusions, unassailable.”

That environmental toxins are a major cause of autoimmune disease is clear. Yet conventional medicine doesn't take that into account when treating autoimmune conditions.

Instead, it tries to shut down the [immune response](#) with powerful medications including nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like Advil and Aleve, steroids like prednisone, anti-cancer drugs like methotrexate, and new drugs like Enbrel and Remicade that block the effects of a powerful inflammatory molecule called TNF alpha.

But those new drugs shut down your immune system so powerfully that they increase your risk of [cancer](#) or life-threatening infections. And they have frequent and serious side effects and often give only partial relief. These drugs may be lifesaving for some in the short run -- but in the long run they do NOTHING to deal with the causes.

There's a better way.

I have successfully treated hundreds of patients with autoimmune diseases by addressing the underlying causes, including [toxins](#), infections, [allergens](#), [poor diet](#), and [stress](#). The roadmap of [functional medicine](#) takes us right to the root of the problem. I have even seen the results of using functional medicine to treat autoimmune disease in myself, in my wife, and in my patients.

Using Functional Medicine to Heal from Autoimmune Disease

Years ago, I had chronic fatigue syndrome. This condition has autoimmune features and my blood tests clearly showed that my body was attacking itself. Getting rid of my mercury poisoning reversed my chronic fatigue and autoimmune problems.

Similarly, my wife developed debilitating autoimmunity with joint pain and fatigue. Getting rid of the [heavy metals](#) in her body with an intensive [detoxification](#) program cured her, too.

And this has been true of so many of my patients.

For each one, I have to find all the causes -- [toxins](#), [allergens](#), infections, [poor diet](#), and [stress](#) -- and deal with all of them while adding back the things the body needs to function optimally, like whole, clean food, nutrients, exercise, stress management, clean water and oxygen, community, connection, and meaning. When I do this, the results are amazing.

One of my patients had crippling psoriasis and related [arthritis](#). She was 42 and couldn't walk up and down stairs, get into a bathtub without help, or properly care for her children. Yet just nine months after we started treatment -- including eliminating [gluten](#) and other [food allergens](#), removing her [heavy metals](#), and balancing her immune system -- she walked back in my office, not only 30 pounds lighter (remember, being [inflamed](#) makes you fat), but completely free of pain and psoriasis.

She's not alone.

Another man suffered for years with the bloody diarrhea and pain of ulcerative colitis. Dietary changes and various kinds of [digestive support](#) helped but he never got better -- until we removed the [toxins](#) and [mercury](#) from his body.

And a recent patient with debilitating fatigue and scars on her brain from multiple sclerosis got nearly complete relief of her symptoms after she had the mercury fillings removed from her teeth and went on a comprehensive detoxification program. When she repeated her MRI, all of the scars from the MS were gone!

So there are ways you can address autoimmune disease if you or someone you love is suffering. Here is what I recommend.

9 Tips for Addressing Autoimmune Disease

- [Read The Autoimmune Epidemic](#). This book will tell you why we have this problem, and how to fix it
- Find a [functional medicine](#) doctor who can help you address autoimmunity.

- · Get tested for [mercury](#) and other heavy metals.
- · Get tested for celiac disease (an autoimmune reaction to wheat and other [gluten-containing grains](#)), which causes over 60 autoimmune diseases. And consider eliminating other inflammatory foods from your diet such as dairy, eggs, corn and animal fats for a few weeks to see if it makes a difference in your symptoms.
- · Take immune-balancing nutrients and supplements, including [vitamin D](#), [essential fats](#) (like EPA/DHA and GLA), and probiotics.
- · Practice deep [relaxation](#) daily through yoga, meditation, biofeedback, or anything that reverses the stress response.
- · Practice the precautionary principle, which says that we should avoid anything with the potential for harm. In the US, something has to be proven harmful before it is taken off the market. In Europe, something has to be proven safe before it is allowed on the market. This is also known as “better safe than sorry.”
- · Learn how to boost your body’s own [detoxification](#) system.

By addressing the root causes of autoimmune disease, [you can start feeling better and getting well today.](#)

Now I’d like to hear from you...

Have you been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease?

How have conventional treatments worked for you?

Do you plan to try any of the lifestyle approaches mentioned here?

Please let me know your thoughts by adding a comment below.

References

(i) Centers for Disease Control. 2005. National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals.

<http://www.cdc.gov/exposurereport/>